

Is Comment Free? New Polis research report on the moderation of online news

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/01/19/is-comment-free-new-polis-research-report-on-the-moderation-of-online-news/

2012-1-19

Why do we moderate websites? If you are Paul Staines who runs the hugely popular Guido Fawkes website then you interfere as little as possible. If you are The Guardian, for example, you have a whole team dedicated to editing comments. As a reader you pay your money (or rather you don't because it's online) and you make your choice. But the decisions made about moderation matter because news websites are increasingly where we go to debate the issues. They influence opinion among journalists, politicians and the public. So is comment free?

Polis has published a new report by Swedish journalist [Sanna Trygg](#), a visiting research fellow supported by the Swedish media foundation, [Journalistfonden](#), that compares the moderation of news in her homeland with the UK.

[Download the full report here](#)

Here is the preface I wrote for the report:

Why is the moderation of comment on news websites such an interesting problem? This paper by Polis visiting research fellow Sanna Trygg explores why we moderate public comment and the effects of different moderation policies. This matters because many people had high hopes that opening up debate around online news would create a better forum for public discussion. We thought that public participation would be entertaining and informative, but above all, that it would create a conversation that would enhance the way we run our lives. In practice, any debate is as likely to end up as a shouting match as it is to turn into some kind of Socratic dialogue.

So what can journalists do to make their comment fields more fertile? Of course, it is perfectly possible not to moderate at all. There are highly successful websites such as Guido Fawkes' ['Order Order' blog](#) where intervention is kept to a bare minimum. The website gets a lot of traffic and some of the comments are funny and insightful.[1] Most are rude, random and predictable. Yet, some would argue that the Guardian's more highly-moderated [Comment Is Free](#) website can also be dominated by the Angry Mob. [2] The point of this paper is not to judge what is the best way of moderating but simply to point out that there is a choice. As with all journalism, you can set your own rules based on your own business model, editorial policy or ethical code.

This paper mainly compares two newspapers that have taken a serious and imaginative approach to reader participation in general, and public comments in particular. The author is Swedish and Polis is based in London so, not surprisingly, the newspapers are from those two countries: the [Svenska Dagbladet](#) and [The Guardian](#). [3] [4] Again, the purpose is not to judge those papers' policies or to advocate a particular degree or style of moderation. Instead, this paper seeks to understand some of the problems faced by the moderators and set them in a wider context that considers the social and political role of online public comment.

We want anyone reading this to get some insight into how moderation works but we also hope that it will stimulate further developments and innovation. As [Polis has shown](#) in its numerous events, [books](#), reports and articles, journalism is now networked. [5][6][7] The public routinely participate in the creation of journalism online, which is now open, interactive and connected. Moderation is a vital part of that process. However, it is still a relatively new relationship and it continues to change as the technologies evolve. We hope this paper contributes to that positive process and exchange of views, so we welcome feedback and, of course, comments.

This paper is the first product of a new visiting research fellowship scheme at Polis, kindly supported by the Swedish media foundation, [Journalistfonden](#). [1] It allows a working Swedish journalist to spend a month with Polis at the London School of Economics researching a topic. It has been a highly enjoyable and rewarding experience for all

involved. We look forward to hosting next year's fellow and would welcome interest from anyone in creating similar fellowships or in working with Polis in other ways.

[1] Journalistfonden för vidareutbildning (The Journalist Fund for Further Training)

<http://www.journalistfonden.se/pages/?ID=124>

[1] <http://order-order.com/>

[2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree>

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

[4] <http://www.svd.se/>

[5] <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/POLIS/home.aspx>

[6] Beckett, C 2008 *SuperMedia* (Blackwell)

[7] Beckett, C 2010 The Value of Networked Journalism (Polis) <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/08/19/new-report-on-networked-journalism-2/>

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science